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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: PM BALKENENDE HOPEFUL ON
URUZGAN EXTENSION

REF: THE HAGUE 1979 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROLAND E. ARNALL FOR REASONS 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende is cautiously optimistic that the Cabinet can reach agreement before the end of the month to extend the Dutch troop deployment in Uruzgan for at least another 18 months. Serious questions remain, however, on the length, financing, and composition of the mission, as well as the level of support the Dutch can expect from Kabul and other partners. Dutch efforts to find third-party troops to supplement Dutch forces have fallen short of expectations, which will complicate the decision process both in Cabinet and in Parliament. Balkenende denied any linkage between the Uruzgan deployment and efforts to reform the Dutch "Dismissal Law," although he acknowledged that the latter was a highly contentious issue with the potential to divide the Coalition government. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On November 13, Dutch Prime Minister Jan Pieter Balkenende told Ambassador Arnall that the outlines of a possible deal on an Uruzgan extension were starting to emerge in Cabinet. Although several serious issues remained unresolved, Balkenende was cautiously optimistic that the Cabinet would be able to present a proposal to Parliament before the end of November. Ideally, this would allow Parliament to debate the issue before going on recess on December 19. Balkenende noted he didn't want Parliamentarians taking advantage of the long recess to "think up hard questions," as happened during the original debate on deploying to Uruzgan.

¶3. (C) According to Balkenende, although the Cabinet is likely to approve some sort of extension beyond summer 2008, it is not yet united on the length of an extension. The Labor Party (PvdA) insists on no more than 18 months, while the Christian Democrats (CDA) and Christian Union (CU) are pressing for 24 to 30 months, at a minimum. There are also significant financial issues still to be worked out, as well as the tricky question of an "exit strategy." In the end, he said, the only viable exit strategy is to turn responsibility over to Afghan forces; for that reason, it is very important that the Afghan government fulfill its commitments to deploy trained Afghan National Army and Police forces to the region.

¶4. (C) Balkenende regretted that Dutch efforts to find a third party or parties to supplement Dutch troops have fallen short of expectations. While the French decision to deploy an OMLT to Uruzgan is a major coup, the Dutch are disappointed Norway and other "major" NATO partners were unresponsive to Dutch approaches. The lack of helicopter and fixed wing aircraft support is a major concern. Given the current instability in Georgia, he added, it is unclear

whether Georgia's offer of 200 troops remains valid. Balkenende noted that the PvdA has now drawn an explicit link between filling the Dutch "modules" with partner forces and the length of an extension -- the more modules left unfilled, the shorter the extension they will approve.

15. (C) Balkenende thanked the Ambassador for U.S. efforts to help the Dutch find partners for an extended mission in Uruzgan. He also thought recent meetings in Washington between Dutch Parliamentarians and Labor Party officials with senior USG officials (including Secretary Rice and D) had been very helpful in focusing the debate. Ultimately, he said, the Dutch will hopefully extend for roughly two years -- provided progress is made in the key areas noted above.

16. (S) In response to a question from Ambassador Arnall, Balkenende denied any linkage between the Afghan extension issue and CDA proposals to amend the country's labor laws to make it easier to hire and fire employees (i.e., the "Dismissal Law.") He acknowledged that many have speculated that the PvdA might be more cooperative on Uruzgan in exchange for keeping the current labor laws intact, but stressed that -- in his mind, at least -- the two issues are unrelated. Of the two, he added, the "Dismissal Law" question was currently the more difficult, and the one more likely to split the coalition. Of the three main issues dividing CDA and PvdA, he noted, one (a possible referendum on the EU Reform Treaty) has already been satisfactorily resolved, and a second (Uruzgan) seemed well on its way to a solution. On the "Dismissal Law" question, however, the PvdA was digging in its heels and not responding to Labor Minister Piet Hein Donner's (CDA's) offers to find a compromise.

17. (C) COMMENT: Balkenende's denials notwithstanding, many observers believe the embattled PvdA needs some sort of victory on the "Dismissal Law" to justify support for an extension in Uruzgan. When the PvdA eventually withdrew its demand for a referendum on the EU Reform Treaty, for example, Parliamentary Faction Leader Jacques Tichelaar publicly identified the "Dismissal Law" question as an issue of greater concern to the party's rank and file. (According to press reports, Tichelaar and CDA Parliamentary Faction Leader Pieter van Geel reached broad agreement on such a deal during a recent Parliamentary Delegation visit to the Antilles, although this was never confirmed.) Domestic politics aside, Balkenende's cautious optimism that the Cabinet is close to an agreement to extend is encouraging, although probably not (yet) the last word. END COMMENT.
Arnall